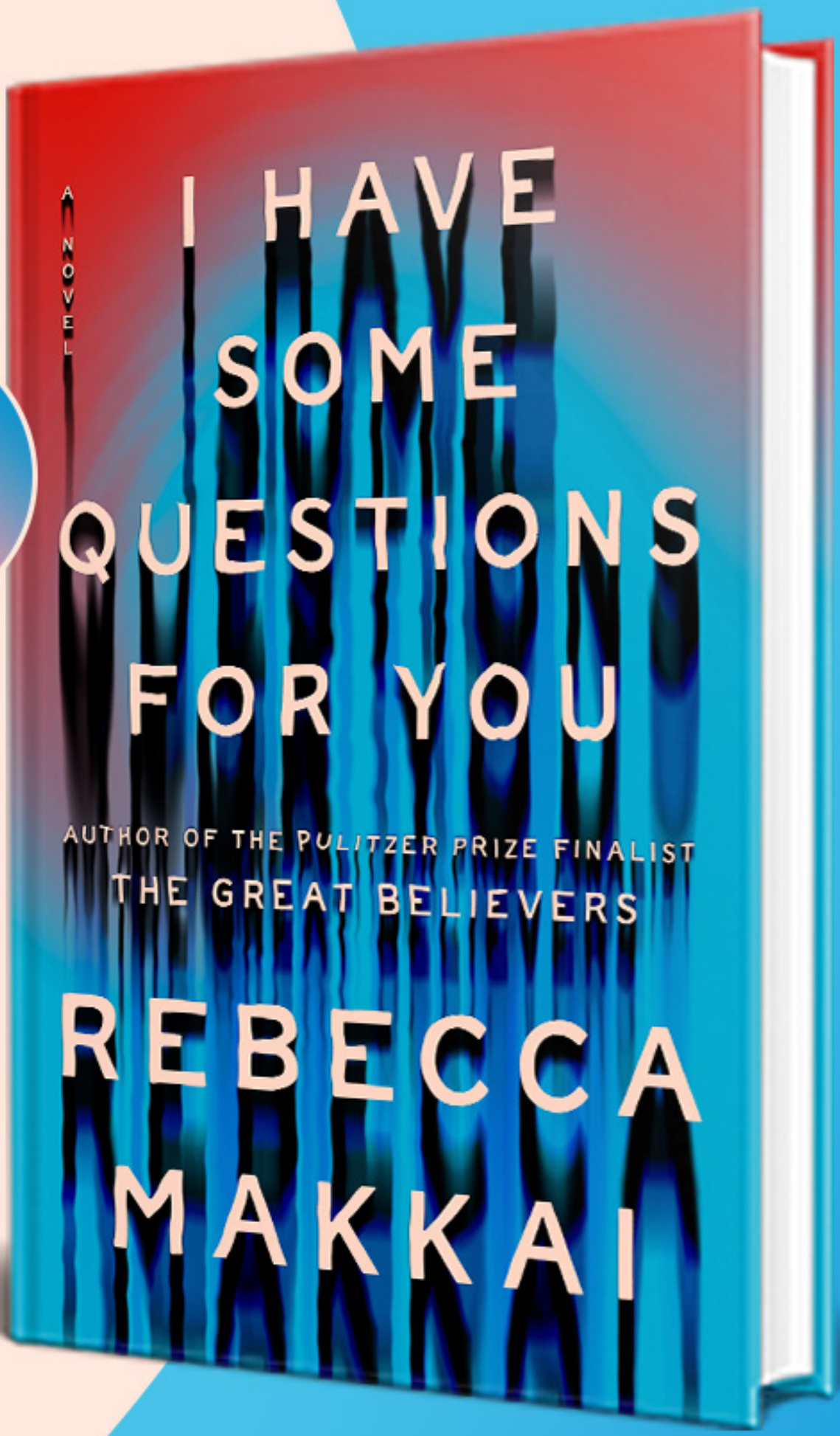
BOOK CLUB KIT



VIKING

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Several characters in *I Have Some Questions for You* reflect on their adolescent selves—versions of themselves that feel at once remote and familiar. Do you think it's possible, with enough distance, for any of us—including Bodie—to see our high school selves clearly? How do you think cultural norms have shifted since you were a teenager? How does Bodie's sense of herself, then and now, affect her understanding of Thalia's case?

2. True crime media has become exceedingly popular in recent years. Why do you think fans of the genre find it so fascinating and even therapeutic to dissect such gruesome events? What considerations factor into being an ethical creator or consumer of true crime media?

3. Bodie's husband, Jerome, is publicly accused of predatory behavior in a relationship with a younger woman. Were you surprised by the way Bo die handles the allegations, or the fact that she was pressured to address them in the first place? How has the advent of social media shaped how public opinion forms and evolves when an alleged crime is made public? How does an awareness of a wider audience affect Bodie's choices in her professional and private life?

4. On p. 174, Bodie thinks, "Every article about Thalia's death had fixated on how Thalia and Robbie were the perfect prep school couple, moneyed and talented and privileged, and Omar Evans—no mention of his mother working at Dartmouth—was this outsider. That made the best narrative." How does the novel's setting shape the story, both past and present? How does prejudice and the idea of the "outsider" function at Granby and in the novel as a whole? Have you experienced any situations in your own life where the truth was warped by a community's biases?

5. On p. 83, Omar's mother, Sheila Evans, says, "They made Omar out to be a bad person all-around. This one accusation wasn't enough, they have to say he was dealing drugs, he was a violent man, he was sleeping with students. They paint a whole picture. They talk about him as if he came from nowhere, as if he had no family." Does this resonate with media coverage you've witnessed in real life?

6. Reflecting on her reaction to Sheila Evans's account of what happened to Omar, Bodie thinks, "I hated that I was thinking about myself rather than becoming a pure vessel to absorb Sheila's grief, but the truth is that while anyone with a heart would have felt it break right then, my heart cracked along familiar fault lines" (pp. 84-85). What does it mean for one's heart to break along "familiar fault lines"? What do you make of Bodie's—and other characters'—tendency to center themselves and their own grief and anxieties, even in the face of the profound suffering of Omar and his family? How do these frameworks shift over the course of the story?

7. Throughout the novel, we are reminded of how many stories of violence against women we regularly encounter on the news, on social media, and in pop culture—the contours of the cases hauntingly familiar even as locations and details differ. What was the cumulative effect of these references as you read? How did they inform your understanding of what happened to Thalia?

8. After hearing Beth's account of her own high school experience, Bodie stifles a fleeting urge to chime in with her own perception of the school's dynamics: "I'd learned long ago not to counter people's trauma with my own" (p. 373). Discuss this revelation. When do the characters in this novel act empathetically and put their own egos aside, and when do they privilege their own versions of events?

9. Toward the end of the novel, on p. 419, Bodie thinks, "I was wrong about you, too, Mr. Bloch, but I still don't feel that wrong. To put it another way: I was mistaken, but I wasn't incorrect." What do you think she means? Do you agree with her? Have you ever felt "mistaken, but [not] incorrect"?

10. Did this novel subvert or expand your knowledge of the criminal justice system? If so, how? What do you predict for the future of Omar's case?

11. Whom did you personally suspect over the course of the novel? Did your judgment ever differ from Bodie's? What surprised you the most as Bodie's understanding of the case evolved?

REBECCA MAKKAI's last novel, *The Great Believers,* was a finalist for both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award; it was the winner of the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction, the Stonewall Book Award, the Clark Prize, and the LA Times Book Prize; and it was one of *The New York Times*' Ten Best Books of 2018. Her other books are the novels *The Borrower* and *The Hundred-Year House*, and the collection *Music for Wartime*—four stories from which appeared in *The Best American Short Stories*. A 2022 Guggenheim Fellow, Rebecca is on the MFA faculties of the University of Nevada, Reno at Lake Tahoe and Northwestern University, and is Artistic Director of StoryStudio Chicago.

Q&A WITH REBECCA MAKKAI

1. To start with the low-hanging fruit here—we, *ahem*, have some questions for you. Tell us about your new novel, which you've called a "literary feminist boarding school murder mystery," and how you came up with this idea.

First of all, I should just say that when I settled on that title, I knew the tax I'd have to pay was that almost every interview would start with this joke. But I love it! I should keep a tally.

I Have Some Questions for You follows a fortysomething film professor and podcaster named Bodie Kane, who's invited to teach a two-week class on podcasting at the same New Hampshire boarding school she attended as a teenager. Being back on campus stirs up enough memories as it is, but then one of her students announces that her podcast topic will be the murder of Bodie's one-time roommate, Thalia Keith, back in 1995. The student is convinced that the case needs reexamining, and that the man convicted—Omar Evans, the school's athletic trainer—is innocent. At first Bodie isn't exactly eager to revisit the past, but soon she begins to have her own questions about the case – what really happened, what she remembers, and who else might be to blame.

In a strange twist of fate, I've lived most of my adult life on the campus of the boarding school I attended, so it was probably inevitable that, eventually, I'd write a campus novel. I met my husband in grad school; he had been teaching high school English on the east coast, but I dragged him back to Chicago, and the place he ended up getting a job was my old high school. We planned to stay for three years but ended up raising our children here. There's a door in my office that looks like a closet—but when you open it, you're in a hallway of a dorm of 40 teenage girls. Living in the place where I went to high school brought back a lot of memories at first, but since I've been here almost 21 years now, those have been overwritten by many newer and stronger ones. Still, I've been fascinated by the sort of palimpsest of memories that happens in a place like this.

Writing *I Have Some Questions for You*, I was inspired by the idea of a place that's simultaneously timeless and transitory. The physical space and traditions of a school might be ancient, but individual people filter through so quickly, spending the most formative years of their lives there and then moving on. There are many, many clichés in the way boarding schools are portrayed in novels and movies: every building is old, it's always October, everyone dresses like it's the 1950s, and so on. I wanted to paint a more realistic picture, in part because it's a more complex and interesting picture. I wanted an adult perspective and the richness of the long view—of someone looking back from adulthood on their own adolescence, as Bodie does. And when a narrative looks backward rather than

forward, the questions it asks fall into the realm of mystery. *What already happened here? What did we miss?* In this case, I decided to lean into a full murder mystery, but to write a novel more grounded in realism than in the tropes of genre.

2. *I Have Some Questions for You* centers on a true crime podcast about a cold case, a little bit like *Serial*. Can you talk about what interested you here, and why you wanted to write about this?

I have long been obsessed with true crime, and like so many others, I got hooked on *Serial* when it first aired. I was fascinated by the predicament of Asia McLean, a witness who had one key piece of information, but was assured that the case was solved. Years later, the producers had to convince her that what she'd seen when she was a teenager was of vital importance. I was also fascinated by the way this group of high school classmates had to keep looking back on one fateful day, and I started thinking about what would have happened if they didn't mostly still live in the same place, making it much more difficult to reconvene. Boarding school graduates, for instance, would be unlikely to live in the same county where they went to school. My original vision for the book was a week with everyone trapped in the same hotel—kind of a hothouse version of what's now the last third of the book.

More generally, though, the novel addresses, and exists within, a culture that's having a true crime moment. There's nothing new about that obsession—look at the way people followed murder trials in the 1920s, for instance—but the podcast is the medium du jour for those fixations, and podcasts allow for a conversational and therefore personal engagement with stories about unsolved, solved, and wrongly solved murders. *Serial* absolutely started that, and got most of us to find the podcast icon on our phones for the first time. While I have some issues with the way they presented that case, we're definitely living in the world that *Serial* built.

A lot of true crime podcasts bother to examine their own fixations; the hosts might talk at length about the psychology of being drawn to true crime. That's something *Dateline*, for instance, has never done. And so the podcasts have been victims of their own introspection, in a way. They've started these conversations, and then, as we become more aware of the ways our fascinations can be problematic, they take that heat.

This is all to say, it's complicated. And therefore, to me, worth writing about.

3. Like your last novel *The Great Believers* (2018), *I Have Some Questions for You* fuses the personal and the political, this time by examining the experience of being a young woman in the 1990s through the prism of today's post-#MeToo culture. Could you speak to these themes—misogyny and the range of abuse and assault that women face—and why you wrote about them?

To me these feel less like themes, and more like the water we're swimming in. It's hard to look back with any clarity on the past and not find yourself astonished by the things we used to put up with. For me, the big revelation of #MeToo wasn't that so many women have experienced outright sexual violence. It was the way people were calling out the forms of daily harassment that I'd always been deeply bothered by, but not having examined them in a long time, assumed were my problem. When you're fifteen and someone harasses you, your instinct is to think it's your fault for being the kind of person someone would pick on, or that it's your fault for not finding it funny. Or at least that's how it went down in the '90s.

The first part of *I Have Some Questions for You* is set in 2018, in a moment when the conversation was less about "cancel culture" and more about people looking back, perhaps for the first time, on experiences they'd repressed or never spoken about. Of course that's exactly what led to public exposure for many abusers, and some oversteps, and endless debate about where the line between the two lies. Bodie is caught right between those two forces—as readers will see.

4. *I Have Some Questions for You* also wrestles with wrongful incarceration and how our criminal justice system has failed Black men. Can you tell us about the genesis of this part of the story?

I wanted to write about a case that was badly investigated and wrongly solved, and realism sent me in this direction. When the police rush to solve a crime, the result is—so terribly often—the wrongful incarceration of a Black man.

This is the ugly flip side of the true crime obsession, and of American justice in general. The story viewers want to hear—the story *Law & Order* serves up again and again—is that the police get their guy, the right guy, his guilt is proven in court, and he's locked away for a very long time and can never hurt anyone again. Even if you set aside the fact that about 50 percent of homicides in the US go unsolved—of the half that do get "solved," so many are solved only in the sense that someone is now in prison and the police can claim a higher solve rate. And for so many reasons of bias, convenience, blatant racism, subconscious racism, and economics, Black men are vastly more likely to experience false arrests and wrongful conviction, with devastating effects on their lives and families. According to the National Registry of Exonerations, 53 percent of recent exonerees in the US are Black, around four times their proportion of the US population. That's only exonerations, of course; the actual number of false convictions is something we can never know.

5. Did you do any special research while writing *I Have Some Questions for You*?

Yes, I needed a ton of research before, during, and after the writing regarding the American carceral system and the New Hampshire legal system specifically. My best resource on the latter was a public defender from Portsmouth who was heroically generous with her time. She was also able to tell me a great deal about the New Hampshire State Prison for Men. Details like the impossibility of getting Omar food during the trial come, horrifyingly, from her actual experience. I was appalled to learn about what happens in states like New Hampshire where interrogations are not required to be recorded, and there is an almost-zero chance of getting a retrial, even when significant exculpatory evidence has been uncovered.

Another great source for Omar's life in prison was Reddit. I actually recommend Reddit to any fiction writer for almost any kind of research. Whatever you're l looking for, there's probably already a conversation about it. And if not, there are people willing to share expertise and open up about what they've witnessed or lived through.

6. The narrative in *I Have Some Questions for You* flips between Bodie's contemporary experience at Granby, and her memories of attending high school there; it's occasionally addressed to someone she suspects was involved in Thalia's murder, and follows her imagination down the rabbit hole of who else could have done it. How did you decide on this structure, and go about weaving these different threads together?

I'm very much a form-follows-function writer, and while I do experiment a great deal with form, it's always a response to the unique challenges of the story I'm trying to tell. I wish I could remember exactly how and when I hit upon the direct address element of the novel, but the truth is that I can't. I do know that having Bodie imagine alternate versions of Thalia's death was a way to get around the impossibility of any mystery, which is the simultaneous desire to go back and the impossibility of going back in time to see what happened. This move let me have it both ways.

In terms of Bodie's memories of high school, we're always fundamentally looking back through Bodie's flawed, changing memory. That was important to me all throughout the writing—that this be a book about memory and its failures and that, like Bodie, we remain trapped in the present.

7. Your last book was the highly acclaimed, award-winning novel *The Great Believers*, a finalist for the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. What have the last five years been like for you? What has been different about the writing or publishing process this time around?

The Great Believers was, by any measure, my breakout book, and I'll always be grateful for the attention it received. I had an amazing twenty months promoting it and connecting with readers, who often had incredibly personal connections to the material. I was traveling a ton, and while I didn't have much time for writing, it was a blast. Then, of course, that all came to an abrupt end in March of 2020. For the first couple of months, I didn't have time to focus on writing—I was wrapped up in incompetent homeschooling, like everyone with kids—but then that fall and winter, I was able to forge ahead with the new book.

Because I've been so homebound over the last few years, all the excitement and promotion around *The Great Believers* doesn't feel quite so real anymore. I'm flattered when people talk about any anticipation around *I Have Some Questions for You*, but I'm also like, "Who are you even *talking* about? She sounds fancy."

8. Each of your books is distinct from the others in structure, tone, and scope—*The Great Believers* is an expansive dual narrative about the AIDS crisis; *The Hundred-Year House* is a satirical family saga told in reverse; *Music for Wartime* is a story collection spanning the realist and speculative; and *The Borrower* is a touching story about a librarian and her ten-year-old patron. What's it like to work in such different genres and styles? Is there anything you haven't done yet that you'd like to try next?

The best part of my job is that I get to write about whatever I want, and to change lanes whenever I want. The way I see it, why would I write about the same thing as last time? Why would I write the same way as last time? I absolutely understand and admire writers who do, but my ADHD absolutely won't let me do that.

I do think I have some themes that are common to most of my work. I tend to write about artists and academics, and I write a lot about memory and the passage of time. Or at least I hope people see those as themes. Rather than ruts. Let's call them themes.

9. What do you hope readers take away from this book?

Of course I hope people stay up all night to finish it, and I also hope it might invite readers to cast an eye back on their own teenage years and think about the accuracy of their own memories, and the wobbly foundations upon which we build our adult selves. Writing the novel certainly did that for me; it felt like four years of therapy dedicated just to working through my own feelings about adolescence and high school. I hope that—like me—this novel sends you back to your high school yearbooks. You'll absolutely love the haircuts. But you'll also start remembering things—both good and bad—that you haven't thought of in years, things you laughed off or ignored or didn't appreciate at the time.

I think this is fundamentally a novel about the institutions we're unwittingly part of, and our responsibility to interrogate and change, or dismantle, or rebuild, those institutions. Despite feeling fundamentally like an outsider at Granby, Bodie was a part of that institution and everything it represented and did. She's also part of a culture of misogyny, even as a woman. She's part of the institution of whiteness. And she's part of America and its deeply flawed justice system. Being a part of something bigger than you doesn't mean that you created that thing or bear all the guilt for everything it does—but (especially when that institution privileges you and your existence) it does mean that you ought to examine it and, at least as a first step, not simply take it as the way things have to be.

I say often that my job as an author is not to answer the big questions, but to take those questions and complicate them further. Above all, that's what I tried to do with this book, and perhaps that's why the word "questions" ended up in the title. I like reading books that unsettle me, that disturb my thinking in some way. I like writing them, too.